Stand-up comedy around the world: Americanisation and the role of globalised media

Juan Sjöbohm
Abstract:

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The purpose of this study is to determine how stand-up comedians outside the U.S. have succeeded to adapt the art of stand-up comedy to their own regional contexts and to define the extent of the influence of American comedians on comedians from other countries, discussing the concept of Americanisation and globalised media. Two stand-up comedy presentations, one by American comedian Bill Hicks, *Revelations*; and one by Swedish comedian Magnus Betnér, *Inget är heligt*, were analysed using comparative content analysis in order to determine similarities and differences in the subjects addressed during the presentations along with similarities and differences in the style of performance. In-depth interviews were conducted as part of this research with professional comedians from Costa Rica: actor and stand-up comedian Hernán Jiménez, and members of the comedy group “La Media Docena” Édgar Murillo and Erik Hernández.

Author: Juan M. Sjöbohm  
Year: 2008  
University: School of Arts and Communication, Malmö University, Sweden.  
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1 Introduction

Stand-up comedy is based on a very old concept that spawned a rather new form of art, starting in the U.S. and slowly spreading to other latitudes. For the last ten years I have learned to appreciate stand-up comedy, initially from American comedians but eventually expanding my taste with British, Latin American, Spanish and Swedish comedians as well. Some of the aspects that attracted me the most besides the obvious entertainment value of this comedic genre, is that it has been a valuable tool for learning about and understanding different cultural aspects related to national identity, traditions, values, and language. It is a very powerful form of communication with great informative possibilities, which ironically has not been considered neither in any course nor textbook throughout my years studying media and communication both in Sweden and Costa Rica. Even other types of humour have gotten some attention, while stand-up comedy has been largely overlooked.

1.1 Purpose of the study and limitations

My aim in this study is to define the extent of the influence of American comedians on comedians from other countries, along with the extent of the role of different media in this process of influence. Another purpose is to open the doors for further discussion and research on stand-up comedy from the perspectives of media and communication.

This is a study of a qualitative nature based on specific cases, approaching the issues from a rather limited point of view, due to lack of economic and human resources. In order to give the research questions a more general perspective several sources from different countries should be consulted, but the intention of this paper is to work as a starting point for an eventual more extensive research.

1.2 Research questions

How have non-American comedians succeeded to appropriate and adapt the genre of stand-up comedy to their own regional contexts?

What has been the role of the globalised media as an influence in this process of adaptation? Can this be described as a process of Americanisation?

2 Background

2.1 What is Stand-up comedy?

As with most definitions, stand-up comedy can be a confusing term to explain, particularly since there is uniqueness in every stand-up act derived from the personality and particularities of each performer. Swedish comedian Adde Malmberg, in his essay “Världens näst äldsta yrke: stand-up comedian”, that serves as an introduction for the book Stå upp! : Boken om stand-up comedy, lays down a few basic rules in order to try to define the term. These rules are:

1. One has to be funny
2. One has to be alone
3. One has to stand up
4. One has to talk directly to the audience
5. One has to be oneself, neither wearing costumes nor interpreting a character
6. One should not be dependant upon the context, stand up by oneself without much specific explanations
7. One shall not use props
8. One shall not use a written script

Malmberg points out that those ground rules are not definitive, as there are far too many exceptions to each rule. Some comedians might perform sitting down, such as Irish comedian Dave Allen; some might make use of characterisations, some might use props for
certain routines, and so on (Malmberg in Crispin & Danielsson 1992: 5-6). Malmberg also quotes American comedian Jerry Seinfeld, who explains that standup comedy is a dialogue, not a monologue (ibid: 10).

This affirmation by Seinfeld can be debated, since there might not be a dialogue, in the sense of a mutual exchange of ideas between at least two persons, in this case between the comedian and the audience. The audience is there to listen and deliver the laughter, although there can be verbal interaction in the form of heckling, a term used to refer to those in the audience who disrupt the act by making fun of the comedian's inability to make them laugh. The comedian might also address specific members of the audience, making them part of the act usually as a target for jokes. Thus, a stand-up comedy act can be regarded as a dialogue, although with a very limited interaction between performer and audience.

American professor Laurence E. Mintz, who has researched American humour extensively, provides a more detailed definition of what stand-up comedy is in his article “Standup comedy as social and cultural mediation”. His basic definition is nonetheless quite similar to Malmberg's:

A strict, limiting definition of standup comedy would describe an encounter between a single, standing performer behaving comically and/or saying funny things directly to an audience, unsupported by very much in the way of costume, prop, setting, or dramatic vehicle (Mintz 1985: 2).

Given this basic definitions, stand-up comedy can be regarded as a very simple performance art in terms of production. Props, costumes and scenery are used by certain comedians, although those are not the main focus of the performance and are used very sparsely. One key rule that is perhaps overlooked by the aforementioned authors is originality, which is of utter importance in stand-up comedy, perhaps more than in any other performance art. In music for example, it is a common and widely accepted practice, to interpret note by note the work of other musicians. This practice would be regarded as plagiarism in the context of stand-up comedy. Thus, a comedian has to come up with his or her own material, or alternatively with original material provided by a writer, even when addressing similar subjects with similar points of view present in the material of other stand-up comedians. A comedian performing the repertoire of another comedian is uncommon, if not inexistent, in the context of stand-up.

Mintz goes into further detail mentioning the range of stand-up performance, that is, the verbal tools employed by comedians to construct their discourse. Those tools are:

1. One liners
2. Verbal games involving puns
3. Malapropisms
4. Double-entendres
5. Violation of socially acceptable language taboos
6. Insult comedy
7. Parodies
8. Put-downs of current popular culture
9. Social & political criticism

On the role of stand-up comedians, Mintz refers to them as comic spoke persons, mediators, articulators of our culture, social commentators, and our contemporary anthropologists (Mintz, 1985: 6). The dialogical approach used throughout the whole presentation is perhaps the most basic characteristic that separates stand-up comedy from other comedy acts that might make use of the tools proposed above by Mintz. The stand-up comedian addresses the audience directly throughout the whole presentation, whereas other types of comedians do it seldom, as the main focus of their presentation might be impersonations, characterisations, magic tricks, props such as a wooden dummy in the case of ventriloquists, etc.

Some comedians, particularly outside the English-speaking world, might not be regarded as stand-up comedians even though they might follow most of the aforementioned definition and rules, as their act is mostly based upon traditional humour/jokes not constructed as a dialogue but as fictional stories. In an interview with Costa Rican
comedians Édgar Murillo and Erik Hernández, which will be presented later on in this paper, they view these comedians as traditional storytelling humorists and folklorists, as they associate the term “stand-up” strictly with the American style of performance.

In the case of Sweden, Elisabeth Crispin makes a difference between stand-up comedy and stå upp-komik in her essay “Från stand-up comedy till stå upp-komedi”, in the book “Stå upp”. Even though the Swedish term is a direct translation of the English term, Crispin notes that the Swedish term refers to the mix of the American styled stand-up with the Swedish storytelling tradition (Crispin in Crispin & Danielsson, 1992: 11).

A theatrical genre that is closely related to stand-up comedy is the one-man show, although the latter may or may not make use of humour or imply an interaction with the audience. In a sense, every stand-up comedy show is a one-man show, but not every one-man show is a stand-up comedy show.

2.2 The American origins of stand-up comedy

The origins of stand-up comedy remain yet unclear, perhaps because of the simplicity of the genre. Mintz refers to the genre as the oldest, most universal, basic, and deeply significant form of humorous expression, excluding truly spontaneous, informal joking and teasing. He explains further that stand-up comedy is the purest public comic communication, performing the same social and cultural roles in practically every known society (Mintz, 1985: 2).

Mintz might refer to precursors to what is known as stand-up comedy nowadays, although he does not mention any particular regional origin but a more universal one. Malmberg traces back the origins of the genre to the Jewish tradition of the badhan, described roughly as an insolent and offensive entertainer who performed during holidays. Other traditions mentioned by Malmberg are the English variety shows, music hall, burlesque and vaudeville, where the comedian had a role of a master of ceremonies and warm up act (Malmberg in Crispin & Danielsson, 1992: 6).

Although those traditions are crucial in the development of stand-up comedy, they are not going to be discussed any further in this paper. Despite the lack of clarity of Mintz regarding the origin of stand-up comedy, he traces it back to the American tradition of the lecture circuit during the nineteenth century, which was supported by successful humorists. Mintz mentions Mark Twain and Artemus Ward as key figures of this precursor to stand-up comedy (Mintz, 1985: 3).

American psychologist Leon Rappoport acknowledges the key role played by Jewish-American comedians in the development of stand-up comedy in his book “Punchlines: The Case for Racial, Ethnic, & Gender Humor”. He refers to an article in Esquire magazine from 1965 entitled “The Yiddishization of American Humor” that describes the dominant role of Jewish comedians in the United States, in an era when Jews amounted to only 3 percent of the total population but where responsible for 80 percent of the humour (Rappoport, 2005: 65).

Malmberg mentions also the importance of Jewish comedians and entertainers in the development of the genre, citing figures such as Mel Brooks, Jackie Mason, Woody Allen and Rodney Dangerfield. Before television’s breakthrough in the American media landscape, stand-up comedy was associated with nightclubs (Malmberg in Crispin & Danielsson, 1992: 8).

Stand-up comedy then became a regular form of entertainment present in late night television talk shows, reaching a wider audience. During the 60’s, the so called comedy clubs started to emerge, such as “The Improv” in New York, which gave comedians the opportunity to test their material in front of an audience. Another comedy club where many famous comedians is “The Comedy
Store” in Los Angeles, opened in 1972, where successful comedians such as Richard Pryor, David Letterman and Robin Williams started to develop their acts (ibid: 9).

Another key phenomenon contributing to the popularisation of stand-up comedy, pointed out by both Malmberg and Rappoport is the role of cable television and particularly the subscription channel HBO. During the mid 70’s, HBO started to transmit concert performances of comedians, usually an hour long. It is worthy of notice that being a subscription channel, HBO was not subject, contrary to network television, to regulations regarding censorship, which allowed comedians to freely make use of obscene language, ethnic slurs, and sexually explicit material. Rappoport describes this as part of the appeal of the medium (Rappoport, 2005: 140).

Before the breakthrough of cable television, the only way to access the racier more explicit material was through attendance of live performances and through available audio recordings of those. Following on HBO’s path, other cable channels such as Showtime, Bravo, and particularly Comedy Central, included stand-up comedy concerts as part of their programming.

3 Theory

3.1 Previous research

As stated earlier, the amount of specific research about stand-up comedy is quite limited. While in the process of searching for reference material, the most prominent and extensive studies found are those published by the aforementioned American psychologist Leon Rappoport in his 2005 book *Punchlines: The Case for Racial, Ethnic, & Gender Humor*; and those by professor of communication and women’s studies Joan R. Gilbert, in her 2004 book *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*. While Rappoport addresses the issue of race and ethnicity in American stand-up comedy, Gilbert focuses on female American stand-up comics. The article “Standup comedy as social and cultural mediation”, written by Laurence E. Mintz, addresses stand-up comedy mostly in a descriptive manner, similar to Adde Malmberg’s and Elisabeth Crispin’s essays in *Stå upp! : Boken om stand-up comedy*, although the purpose of the book is to function as a compilation of transcribed material from nine Swedish comics.

On non-American stand-up comedy, I found two research papers. One was written by Wai King Tsang and Matilda Wong, respectively from the Universities of Hong Kong and Macau, dealing with the use of language, focusing on pronouns and code-switching in the construction of a Hong Kong identity by analysing a stand-up comedy presentation by Hong Kong comedian C.W. Wong (Tsang and Wong, in *Discourse & Society*, 2004: 767-785). The second one, written by Olga Mesporova, assistant professor of Russian at Iowa State University, focuses, on female stand-up comedians in Russia, dealing with their lack of participation in the writing of stand-up routines, as those are almost exclusively written by men, even those performed by women (Mesporova, in *The Russian Review*, 2003: 429-439).

There is currently a research project lead by Dutch sociologist and researcher Giselinde Kupiers entitled *The Globalization of Humor: The Translation, Acculturation, and Reception of American Television Comedy in Four European Countries*, which is focused on media sociology and cultural globalisation, according to the information available at her personal website (Research, in Kupiers website, 2007). Unfortunately the results are expected to be published later in 2008 or even later, according to the information provided in the abstract (Research information website, Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2006).
3.2 Americanisation

According to Encyclopaedia Britannica, the concept of Americanisation referred initially to activities during the early 20th century designed to prepare foreign born residents of the United States for full participation in citizenship. It aimed not only at the achievement of naturalization but also at an understanding of and commitment to principles of American life and work (Americanization, in Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, 2008).

The concept is nowadays closely related to cultural imperialism, as Americanisation is defined as the substitution of a given culture with American culture (Americanization, in Wikipedia, 2008). British sociologist Dominic Strinati focuses mostly on the negative connotations of Americanisation in his book *An introduction to the theories of popular culture*, referring to the concept as a threat, particularly from the point of view of other British critics. The concept is not only associated with culture, but with politics as well. Strinati also discusses British sociologist and media theorist Dick Hebdige, who exposes a less harsh view of the Americanisation process, focusing on how American culture is not substituting regional culture but it being reinterpreted. Hebdige pinpoints the rich iconography of American culture in films, advertising images, clothes and music. This iconography, set of symbols, objects and artefacts can be assembled and re-assembled by different groups in limitless combinations and even taken out of their original historical and cultural contexts and juxtaposed against signs from other sources (Hebdige, quoted in Strinati, 1995: 34).

Hebdige’s view can be used to describe the process in which the genre of stand-up comedy, an American form of entertainment, has been adapted by comedians in other latitudes, mixing the dialogical performance style that forms the genre with regional traditions and personal views. Moreover, the foreign influences might not necessarily be American, as they can come from other sources. Strinati refers to this as the cultural discrimination exercised by the audiences in terms of consumption of popular mass culture, a term closely related to Americanisation. This cultural discrimination on behalf of the audience is central on the debate on the populist vs. the elitist view of popular culture, where elitists view popular culture as standardised and homogenised, while populists view it as diverse. Strinati does recognise that both mass and elite culture make regular use of standardised formats. (Strinati, 1995: 41).

German communications scholar Kai Hafez, in his book *The Myth of Media Globalization*, discusses the thesis of cultural imperialism, stating that the point of reference is almost always the asserted and assumed influence of American cultural exports on the other cultures of the world (Hafez, 2007: 83). Hafez mentions as well that the notion of thoroughgoing US dominance and global significance is taken for granted in US conservative circles, citing Washinton Post columnist Charles Krauthammer:

> We [U.S.] dominate every field of human endeavour from fashion to film to finance. We rule the world culturally, economically, diplomatically and militarily as no one has since the Roman Empire (ibid: 83).

Hafez is critical of this conservative statement. He does acknowledge the U.S.’s leading position in terms of culture, taking entertainment as an example and how those products are usually more globally available than those of any other national culture, although he is critical about the confusion between “leading position” and “hegemony”. He refers to western cultural goods as raw material that does not necessarily but may work to change cultures, as their messages may take force and suppress indigenous cultural achievements depending on the individual (ibid:86). He also states, using imported films as an example, that the meaning may be changed by cutting scenes, dubbing or subtitling, but the film’s core message reaches the consumers in the importing country (ibid:82). Hafez highlights
the role of the individual as a consumer of those cultural goods to challenge the perceived notion of hegemony. He mentions the fact that the U.S. forces no one to consume its cultural exports; people do so on their own free will (ibid: 88).

The role of the individual consumer is a key issue regarding the extent of Americanisation, taking into consideration the amount of options that might be available in terms of media consumption. For example, even if there is a majority of American programmes on television schedules, the individual can choose not to consume them at all, as there might be regional programming that he or she can find more appealing to personal preferences. Depending on the available options, a consumer can simplify or diversify the consumption of cultural goods, for example by choosing to watch only news channels or by choosing to watch a wide array of programmes from different countries, among other options and countless combinations of assorted media. On this matter, Hafez points out that in almost a quarter of European countries, the top ten list of programmes is almost exclusively made up of national productions, with a similar phenomenon happening on Arab television (ibid: 89).

In his book *Globalisering – kommunikation och modernitet*, Swedish media professor André Jansson mentions the role of American media producers in what he calls the global homogenisation of the global programming. Popular programmes in the U.S. are sold rather cheap since they already made profit through domestic advertising. As an example, Jansson mentions that an episode of the series *Kojak* in 1979 cost NBC US$2.25 million to produce, while Swedish television bought the rights to transmit the episode for 45,000 Swedish kronor (approx. US$10,500 in 1979) (Jansson, 2004: 104). Jansson’s statement appears contradictory when compared to Hafez’s, as the latter writes that because of comparatively low production costs and high demand, European television systems favour national production of series and dramas (Hafez, 2007: 89).

Jansson’s position on the Americanisation of culture follows closely the one of Hafez. Jansson acknowledges the U.S. as the leading exporter of media texts, and also as an important influence on media producers worldwide. He also refers to the importance of the audience’s reception of such texts when he mentions that the audience can experience attraction, fascination, and even let itself be influenced by those texts, although he clarifies that this does not necessarily means that deeply rooted ideas, values and patterns are lost because of this contact. The extent of the homogenising effect of American media products is related by Jansson to the wide availability of those products, serving as a common cultural denominator for people coming from different cultures. These globally available media products lead, according to Jansson, to a pluralized cultural identity, as local and close experiences are mixed with distant and boundless ones (Jansson, 2004: 110). Other researchers concur in this issue, such as John Storey in his book *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, where he states that popular culture is what we make from the commodities and commodified practices made available by the culture industries (Storey, 2001: 192). Communication and culture researcher John Tomlinson adds that there is a dynamic between external cultural influence and local practice, discarding the notion of cultural imposition (Tomlinson, 1999: 85).

As an explanation to the leading position of American media texts, Jansson mentions that the American cultural industry was already adapted from its beginnings to a multicultural society (Jansson, 2004: 114). On this same path, Hafez ascribes the success of American films to a low level of cultural attachment and tremendous potential for universalisation, a product of the impending multiculturalism of American society in the 20’s and 30’s during the booming of the industry. Hafez attributes this success also to the economic capabilities of Hollywood (Hafez, 2007: 86).
The American culture is not homogenous. It is rather a composite culture developed from the influx of different ethnic groups coming from all over the world. This is reflected, to varying degrees, on their cultural exports. Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo discusses in this regard that all cultures undergo continuous processes of transculturation in the form of a two-way borrowing and lending between cultures, as he sees them as more or less permeable and in constant flux, thus disregarding cultural purity in favour of cultural hybridity (Rosaldo in García-Canclini, 1995: xv).

In this regard, one can mention the case of American stand-up comedy and its multicultural origins, particularly from often-marginalised ethnic minorities in the U.S., such as Jews, African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Asian-Americans, etc. Communication professor Joanne R. Gilbert refers to this as “performing one’s marginality” in her book Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique, where she explores the use of marginality in stand-up comedy. She makes a differentiation between dominant and marginal culture, and how representatives of different minorities use their difference as a means of survival, foregrounding and capitalizing on the very stigma that threatens their existence (Gilbert, 2004: xi).

### 3.3 Uses and gratifications

Although it is not the main purpose of this study to make an extensive audience research, there is a special interest in viewing performing comedians as a specific audience and as consumers of different kinds of media. The theory of uses and gratifications was introduced in the 40's by sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld following his interest on the reasons for consuming different radio programmes such as soap operas and quiz shows; and further developed by media researcher Jay Blumler and sociologist Elihu Katz, and several other researchers such as Stephen Barnard. The theory proposes that audiences use the media to gratify certain personal needs, namely for diversion (escape from everyday routine); integration with others (companionships, relationships); self-identify (comparing one’s own life with those of others, including fictional personalities); and surveillance (information about the world beyond the front door) (Barnard, 2000: 102).

The media can be regarded as the main source of cultural production. The needs, as described by Barnard are limited, since other needs can also be satisfied as well by the media beyond those of diversion, integration, self-identification and surveillance. One of the needs, particularly of interest for this study is influence, is the pedagogic potential of the texts or cultural products, that is, as sources of information that can be later appropriated by an individual in order to create media texts of his own. Comedians, and other performing artists among others, make use of media texts related to their respective crafts in order to get themselves acquainted with specific conventions, rules, and structures established by others. Regarding the origin of those media texts, the theory of uses and gratifications serves as a complement to the theory on the globalisation of media and the process of Americanisation, particularly related to the perspective of the individual as a consumer of media, not focusing only on single choices but also the uses the individual makes of the messages contained in the media texts in order to fulfil needs that are not explicit in the aforementioned definitions.

The concept of influence can relate to the different needs defined by Barnard, for instance self-identification in the sense of comparing the personal abilities with those of the performers presented on the media texts, or surveillance, as the exploration of different trends and styles relevant to the studied genre. The need for diversion might work as a trigger for the performer to make a different use of the very same media text. The surveillance need may be the one that better relates to the concept of influence, although surveillance can also imply satisfying a need.
for information without making any further use of it.

4 Methodology

4.1 Comparative content analysis

Content analysis is a widely used method within the social sciences. Authors such as Hans Sebald, in his paper “Studying National Character Through Comparative Content Analysis”, describes content analysis in a strict sense as a way of describing the content that can be useful to make inferences based upon findings (Sebald in Social Forces, 1962: 320).

Political scientist Ole Holsti provides a wide definition of content analysis as any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages (Holsti in “Content Analysis”, Wikipedia, 2008). This means that there is not a unique way of approaching textual analysis, but different methods adapted to specific purposes. On a research paper on qualitative content analysis in nursing research, Ulla Graneheim and Berit Lundman make notice that there are conflicting opinions and unsolved issues regarding meaning and use of concepts, procedure and interpretation. They state that content analysis originally dealt with objective, systematic and quantitative description of manifest content of communication, but expanded over time to include interpretations of latent content as well (Graneheim & Lundman, 2003: 105). The manifest content will be the main focus of the analysis in chapter 6 of this paper.

Graneheim and Lundman further explain the concept of unit of analysis, which can be related to a wide meaning of the term text, as it can include programmes, interviews, persons and organisations among many others. Graneheim and Lundman cite nursing researcher Barbara Downe-Wamboldt, who considers interviews and diaries in their entirety as units of analysis, along with the amount of space allocated to a topic or an interaction under study. Graneheim and Lundman also mention the concept of meaning of unit as the constellation of words or statements related to the same central meaning. The unit of analysis works as the context of the meaning of unit (ibid:106). In simpler terms, the unit of analysis is the whole, whereas the meaning of unit is the different subjects addressed in the whole. Shortening of text is addressed by Graneheim and Lundman, particularly regarding a condensation of the text, a concept proposed by researchers Amanda Coffey and Paul Atkinson, where the text is shortened but still maintaining the core, as opposed to the concept of reduction of the text that, according to Graneheim and Lundman, deals with reducing the size of the text but fails to indicate anything about the remaining quality of the reduction (ibid. 106). The condensation approach will be used in this paper in order to present the material.

For this study, I chose to analyse and compare two representative stand-up comedy presentations, one by American comedian Bill Hicks, Revelations (1993), and one by Swedish comedian Magnus Betnér, Inget är heligt (2007), in order to identify similarities and differences between both presentations. “Presentation” in this context refers to the concept of unit of analysis. The core subjects in the presentations, that will be analysed later on, refer to the concept of meanings of unit.

These presentations are representative of the scope of the material of both comics. Another characteristic they have in common is that both were performed in theatres were they were the only act, meaning that the audience was there because of them, which differs from the comedy club performances where several comedians are presented and the audience is there more to see stand-up comedy live and not to watch a specific comic.

Betnér has often being compared to Hicks by Swedish media, and he has acknowledged
Hicks as not only an important influence in his style but also as the main inspiration to start a career as a stand-up comedian. The focus of this comparative analysis is the performance in itself, as to the different resources used to deliver their messages to the audience. The subjects addressed are also a focus as well, in order to identify which subjects they have in common, which are unique to each comedian and the different perspectives and views employed to address the subject.

For practical reasons I chose to focus solely on one presentation by each comedian although other material may be referenced, particularly from Hicks, since his amount of available recorded audiovisual material is far more extensive than that of Betnér.

This methodology has certain disadvantages in terms of drawing general conclusions, as the analysis applies only to the comparison of the aforementioned comedians and not to the identification of general differences and similarities between American and Swedish stand-up comedy, given the individual character of this genre of comedy. Both comedians can be regarded as successful and regarded as references representative of the genre in their own contexts, although in order to establish a more general comparison, an extensive analysis covering a rather large amount of material, which in itself is extremely time and resource consuming. This disadvantaged is addressed by author Mike Palmquist, teacher of research methods and theories. Among other disadvantages of this particular methodology, Palmquist mentions that it can attempt too liberally to draw meaningful inferences about the relationship and impacts implied in a study and that it tends to simply consist of word counts (Palmquist in “Content Analysis”, Texas University website).

The approach for this specific study is qualitative and not quantitative as it analyses few specific cases; therefore the cultural context of both performances is taken into consideration in order to address particularities present on each performance.

4.2 In-depth interviews

To address the research question of the role of the global media and Americanisation, two in-depth interviews with professional Costa Rican comedians were conducted; one with actor and stand-up comedian Hernán Jiménez and one with comedians Édgar Murillo and Erik Hernández, members of comedy group “La Media Docena”. The approach to both interviews is qualitative, with mostly open questions in order to obtain deeper insights from the interviewees, following more the dynamic of a conversation rather than that of a formal interview, although most of the questions were planned in advance in both cases. Sociologist Karen O’Reilly, in her book Ethnographic Methods, discusses three types of interviews: a structured interview, with predetermined questions asked in order and with no room for extra questions; an unstructured interview, where the interviewer may only have a guide of topics to address giving the interviewee more freedom to wander off as in a conversation; and finally a semi-structured interview, which contains elements of both aforementioned types (O’Reilly, 2005: 116).

For this study the semi-structured type of interview was used in order to allow the interviewees to speak their mind more freely but within a specific topic. Because of time considerations, as participants had other activities scheduled, a structure was needed.

As Jiménez, Hernández and Murillo are non-American professional comedians, their contribution is relevant for the subjects addressed in this study. Jiménez, formally trained as an actor in Costa Rica, the United States and Canada, is a pioneering figure in Costa Rican stand-up comedy, debuting in 2007 presenting his material entitled Al derecho y al revés (Forwards and backwards). Murillo and Hernández have unusual backgrounds, taking into consideration them
being full time dedicated professional comedians. Murillo holds a master’s degree in marketing and worked as a regional brand manager, while Hernández is a chemical engineer and worked as a college professor before taking their comedy act as a full time endeavour. Their group La Media Docena is active performing live in theatres and other venues as well as in their own television programme on Teletica, one of the biggest television networks in Costa Rica.

The interview with Jiménez was comparatively more structured then the one with Murillo and Hernández, as it was intended to be used in the gestaltung part of this project consisting of a radio programme on stand-up comedy outside the U.S. For this purpose, the chapter on how to conduct radio interviews from Challe Åström’s Radiohandboken was used as a reference together with O’Reilly’s methods.

A factor that may have affected the outcome in Jiménez’s interview is that the interview was conducted in English, whereas Jiménez is a native Spanish speaker, fully proficient in English as a second language. The reason for using English for this interview is that it is also used for the radio programme, which is done in English in order to make it understandable in Sweden, where English is widely used as a second language, particularly in higher education. At the beginning of the interview he seemed mildly uncomfortable as myself, being also a native Spanish speaker, about the language issue, which raises the question of the outcome being different had the interview been conducted in Spanish. With that in mind, I informed him in advance about the language issue and the topics I was going to address in the course of the interview. Another issue that may have affected the outcome is the location chosen for the interview, as it was a public place chosen for convenience purposes. In the case of Murillo and Hernández, the interview was conducted in Spanish at their office. They were also informed in advance about the topics through their secretary.

5 Material

5.1 Interviews

5.1.1 Interview with Hernán Jiménez

The first question addressed the issue of the inspiration to give stand-up comedy a try in Costa Rica and the appeal of the genre. Jiménez stated that he has always found stand-up comedy appealing as well as difficult and challenging. His first try came from a one man show written by himself that was not directly connected to stand-up comedy, although one of the characters addressed the audience directly, following the same approach as stand-up comedy. This character took about 10% of the whole show. According to Jiménez, the character was successful, which in turn gave him the inspiration to extend that writing and turn it into a whole show. During his time studying acting in both the U.S. and Canada he never tried stand-up comedy, as using English was an issue affecting his confidence. As he sees stand-up comedy as an art based mostly on his own observations, he realised that there was a lot to be observed in the third world and that it would be interesting to capitalise on that.

Regarding his favourite English speaking comedians he cites American comedians Jerry Seinfeld and Chris Rock, mostly because they are famous beyond their stand-up material, as they later became notorious through their work in film and television. He acknowledges that he was rather ignorant about the stand-up genre in general. He also mentions that through the video website YouTube and DVD recordings he found not only English speaking comedians but also Spanish speaking comedians mostly from Spain, Argentina and Colombia, from whom he learned a lot about stand-up by watching their presentations.

Regarding the question of what makes stand-up comedy new to the Costa Rican audience; Jiménez mentions the general
underdevelopment of the performing arts scene in the country, as there is neither an established film industry nor a developed theatre tradition. He sees Costa Rica as a rather new country in terms of the arts, taking baby steps towards an established industry.

On the questions about subjects addressed in stand-up comedy that might not work in a Costa Rican context, he perceives there is a lack of open mindedness, especially if compared to developed countries. He also mentions that politically incorrect material is not really widely accepted. Racial, sexual and cultural issues need to be addressed carefully as to not alienate the audience, which Jiménez sees as frustrating. One of his bits about marriage being a failed institution proved to be uncomfortable, sensing that the audience was not really letting themselves go. When asked about a review of the performance from the biggest Costa Rican newspaper, La Nación, where the critic mentions a lack of irreverence inherent to stand-up comedy, Jiménez agreed with the review and reconsidered a lot of the material in order to make the show edgier, but had to step back as the edger material seemed to be too much for some people in the audience.

For the next question regarding if his material would work outside Costa Rica, Jiménez expressed that he was sceptical about it, as he considers his material as very local, although he also underlines that the material from several Spanish and Colombian comedians was funnier to him precisely because of the local character. Referring to Jerry Seinfeld and American comedians in general, he regards their humour as having a much more universal character, as American comedians have to appeal to a very widely diverse audience, as opposed to smaller countries with tighter cultures. Despite that, he mentions that comedians from smaller countries also have more universally appealing material.

In terms of performance, Jiménez mentions that American comedians have been a major influence in his act, particularly borrowing and appropriating certain physical qualities of the performers. He goes on to mention that audiences, particularly in the U.S., are exposed to stand-up comedy almost everyday through late night shows, although he refers to it as a “watered down version”, as the material is usually scripted by a staff of writers and not the host, who often reads the material. Besides this, he mentions his own life experiences and observations as a strong influence. In the case of his own audience, he mentions that there were both people who were quite familiarised with stand-up comedy and people who did not have much knowledge about the genre.

Finally, when questioned about the impact of the Internet as a source for accessing culture from other countries, possibly helping stand-up comedy to establish as a regular form of entertainment in Costa Rica, Jiménez regards the impact as not that big. He also mentions that people in Costa Rica have been exposed already to American culture through movies and also television. He also mentions that a possible reason behind stand-up comedy not being imported by Costa Rican media is because it is difficult to translate or subtitle and therefore it has to be local, which he regards as positive as it requires the creation of domestic material.

5.1.2 Interview with Édgar Murillo and Erik Hernández

The interview started with a discussion about the current state of Latin American humour. Both Murillo and Hernández agreed that Latin American humour has decayed in general in terms of originality. They mention Mexican comedians Cantiflas and Los Polivoces, who were active during the late seventies and even in earlier decades, as being creators of original material and original characters, contrasting them with current comedians that make use of rather generic jokes taken from the Internet or adapt American humour as a substitute for original scripts and characters. Hernández mention that it has become a trend in several Latin American countries, as programmes from different countries follow the same formulas.
The next question referred to the fact that their own television programme has been often compared to American programme Saturday Night Live, particularly in message boards in the Internet. Hernández mentions that a possible reason for the comparison is that Saturday Night Live is probably the only reference to sketch comedy that a big portion of the audience has. Murillo said that the comparison could be due to a similar style used for the introduction of the programme, although the influence did not come only from Saturday Night Live but also from late night talk shows such as David Letterman’s, Conan O’Brien’s and assorted programmes from Canada and the United Kingdom. Murillo also mentions other influences such as British Monty Python and Rowan Atkinson, Argentineans “Les Luthiers” and several sketch comedy shows from Spain. Hernández and Murillo also explain that the four members of the group have had access to cable television from an early age. Continuing with the issue of influence, Hernández mention that most of the influence is rather indirect or unconscious. Murillo, who states that he is constantly looking for new comedy programmes, mentions the importance that Youtube and similar video websites has had on him, as they give him access to material not provided by cable operators, such as the American comedy channel Comedy Central or Japanese hidden camera shows, among many others. Both Hernández and Murillo emphasize the convenience that those websites provide, as they use it as a source for material that later is parodied in their programme, particularly music videos. The easy access allows them to learn about different visual elements used for different types of music, such as locations and camera use.

Regarding the use of video websites to distribute their own material, they mentioned a particular musical video they made for the TV programme, which was a parody of both cumbia and heavy metal music called “La cumbia metalera” (The headbanger cumbia). The video received more than 3 million views in Youtube, which they regard as something very unusual for a Costa Rican production. Murillo mentions that most of the positive feedback they got was not from Costa Ricans, but from other Spanish speaking countries.

Discussing the subjects addressed in their programme, Murillo mentions that the group generally makes use of self-censorship, generally avoiding subject matter such as religion and racism. Murillo adds that the Costa Rican market and the Latin American market in general, are rather conservative. Hernández mentions that despite this conservatism, racier programmes, usually American, are consumed in all of Latin America, mentioning the cartoon South Park as an example. Both Murillo and Hernández criticise that this sort of programmes are usually accepted if produced in the U.S., but similar programmes produced in Latin America tend to be rejected or considered as being not as good as their American counterparts.

Continuing with the issue of self-censorship, Hernández described a rather racier sketch they produced where an evangelic pastor founds a church with the sole purpose of becoming rich. Even when the group considered taboo the use of religion for comedic purposes, the sketch was aired. They were expecting lots of complaints form the audience, but only got one complaint which they deemed irrelevant. Murillo explains that humour always comes first, and if a joke turns out to be funny, the subject matter is usually overlooked.

When asked about the potential for internationalisation of their material, Murillo mentions that the group has the Spanish speaking audience in general and not only the Costa Rican audience as a target audience, even when the show is only broadcasted in Costa Rica. For international distribution, Murillo thinks that the material should have some minor changes. Hernández disagrees, claiming that there is no need to make any adaptations. He uses the example of Mexican programmes shown in Costa Rica, and how
people tend not to question the use of Mexican terms and phrases not used in Costa Rican Spanish. He refers to Murillo’s idea that the humour comes first, and that the core of the humour is what really matters despite its regional origin, as many of the terms, he said, can be usually understood by the context in which they are used.

As a follow up, Hernández mentions that even though the Internet has become a popular medium for distribution, network television is still bigger and allows for a better positioning with a bigger audience. Hernández regards this impact as very immediate. At this point, Murillo and Hernández share an anecdote regarding this positioning. As their programme debuted, the reviews were mixed, but after six weeks on the air, using similar material, the amount of positive reviews became much bigger. Another aspect pinpointed by Murillo is that access to cable television and Internet in Costa Rica is still minimal, especially compared to the access of network television, which reaches a big majority of the population.

5.2 Presentations

5.2.1 Bill Hicks

The show, entitled Revelations, was recorded in the United Kingdom in 1992 for Channel 4 and later broadcasted through HBO in the United States in 1993. According to the biography on his website, Hicks started his career as a stand-up comedian in his teens in Houston, Texas, moving to Los Angeles, California, shortly after graduating high school. His first big break came in 1984 with his first appearance at the David Letterman late night show, where he performed a total of eleven times during his career (Bio, Bill Hicks' Official website, 2008). His twelfth scheduled appearance was censored and never aired. His performances on the show were usually toned down in order to be approved. According to the 2003 documentary Outlaw Comic: The Censoring of Bill Hicks, the comedian was regarded as unpatriotic in his native U.S., as his criticism of the Reagan and Bush Sr. administrations was harsh, as well as his criticism of the American lifestyle; while becoming critically successful overseas, particularly in Britain and Australia. Hicks died in 1994 of cancer, just as he started gaining popularity in his native U.S. after being honoured “Hot comic of the year” by Rolling Stone magazine (Outlaw Comic: The Censoring of Bill Hicks, 2003).

Revelations opens with a joke about how much he liked to go to Britain for the weather, as he claimed Britain does have a weather, unlike Los Angeles which is hot and sunny. He goes on to ridicule how inhabitants of the city love the weather by stating that only reptiles feel the same about that kind of weather. He continues describing the pedestrian right of way law that states that vehicles must stop whenever there is a pedestrian crossing the street. Hicks makes use again of ridicule stating that it is a “stupid law”, and that only in Los Angeles common courtesy has to be legislated. He goes on discussing a current event, the Los Angeles riots of 1992, where truck drivers who stopped and pulled out of their trucks and beaten. He jokes about the incident blaming the pedestrian right of way law, as truckers did not stepped on the gas instead. In conjunction to this joke, he makes use of dramatisation, as he portrays a truck driver politely stopping to let a mob armed with clubs and Molotov cocktails that eventually pulled him out of the truck through the window.

On the next bit, Hicks talks about quitting smoking and how appealing cigarettes seemed to him. Describing the cigarettes he claim that each cigarette now seemed to be “made by God, rolled by Jesus and moisten shut by Claudia Schiffer’s pussy”, a phrase that make religious references in a rather blasphemous fashion along with sexually explicit language.

Hicks moves on to a bit about George Bush Sr. and his foreign policy, where he claims that he does not disagree with the policy, but believes that Bush is “the child of Satan here to destroy
the planet Earth”. He also refers to Vice-president Dan Quayle as “Damian”, a reference to the 1976 horror film *The Omen*, where the Damian is the child of Satan. He uses dramatisation again, making a parody of Quayle by using a demonic voice. This bit could be regarded as insult comedy, using again religious references. Continuing with his critic towards Bush, he blames him for arming the world and then invading the countries that bought the weapons, such as Iraq, which was invaded by the U.S. military at the time of the recording of the show. He refers to the U.S. as the “bullies of the world”, comparing the country to a character played by Jack Palance in a movie called *Shane*. Hicks re-enacts a scene from the movie where Palance’s character challenges a sheep herder to pick up a gun. When the herder picks up the gun, Palance’s character shots him, justifying his action by explaining that the herder had a gun.

For the next bit, Hicks addresses the subject of John F. Kennedy’s assassination, which can be regarded as a rather sensitive issue. He explains, with a serious tone, how a totalitarian government manages information leaving people in the dark. Hick then stops and says “sorry, wrong meeting”. He continues addressing the subject by explaining how accurate the Assassination Museum in Dallas is, as “[Lee Harvey] Oswald is not there”. In this manner, Hicks states his position against the official claim that Oswald was the assassin, regarded as a lie, exemplified by the fact that visitors are not allowed to approach the window, which according to Hicks, could make them realise that it was impossible to shot Kennedy from there. For this effect he portrays a visitor being surprised about the fact by screaming “no fucking way”. It should be noted that the use of profane language is frequent throughout the entire presentation. He wraps up the bit by telling how people in the U.S. tell him to let the issue go, as it happened a long time ago. As a response he tells them to “not bring Jesus to him”, in reference to Jesus’ crucifixion. This line can also be regarded as blasphemous. The religious reference serves as a transition into the next bit, where Hicks brings up the subject of Christian fundamentalism, emphasising the influence it had over the U.S. during the prior twelve years during Ronald Reagan’s two presidential terms together with Bush’s administration. He dramatises a fundamentalist having “his finger on the button” while saying with blank eyes “tell me when Lord, tell me when. Let me be your servant, Lord”; as a reference on how fundamentalists believe the Bible to be the exact words of God, “including the wacky fire and brimstone Revelations ending”. The bit moves on to the issue of creationism vs. evolution. As a way of ridiculing creationism, Hicks asks about dinosaurs and how they are not mentioned in the Bible, reciting a passage narrating how Jesus removed a splinter from a brontosaurus and how they became friends; another way of ridiculing Christian fundamentalism. The use of profanity in the bit can also be considered blasphemous.

The subject of Christianity continues to be addressed by questioning the origin of the Bible, using the phrase “I think what God meant to say...”; referring to how the Bible gets changed even when it is considered by fundamentalists to be the word of God. Hicks goes on with the bit, questioning if Jesus would actually want to “see a fucking cross”, referring to the practice among Christians of wearing crosses as a symbol of their religion, claiming that maybe that is the reason why Jesus have not come back yet and in retaliation buries fossils with God to create confusion. Once again Hicks makes use of blasphemy in his dramatisation of Jesus. Hicks compares this practice with wearing rifle pendants in front of John F. Kennedy’s widow as a sign of respect. At this moment, Hicks addresses the subject of Kennedy’s assassination once again, parodying Americans who believe the official position on the subject. He refers to the television programme *American Gladiators* as an example of vacuous entertainment made with the purpose of distracting the public from the Kennedy issue.

The subject of marketing and advertising is addressed next in the show, where Hicks encourages people who work within those
fields to kill themselves, claiming also that it is not a joke. He insults those who work within those areas by calling them evil scumbags, followed by a dramatised parody portraying marketers researching Hicks claims referring to them as a good market. Hicks goes on to say that marketers probably sleep like babies at night, even if they had to promote the sale of arsenic childhood food. Hicks then mentions the movie Basic Instinct, referring to it as “a piece of shit” in what he calls “Bill’s capsule review”, disregarding any elaborated review discussing the movie. He then starts screaming in anger about people trying to tell audiences what to think, only to stop abruptly to say “sorry, wrong meeting again”, as he did in a previous bit. He continues to criticise the test audiences of Basic Instinct, responsible for removing lesbian sex scenes form the movie, claiming that he would have removed Michael Douglas from the movie in order to make it into an hour and a half of “Sharon Stone eating another woman”, an explicit sexual reference. He calls his version of the movie “The Goat Boy Edited Version”, referring to a depraved character, portrayed right after the bit. The portrayal of Goat Boy includes an explicit mimicking of oral sex. The bit is stopped with Hicks saying “I’m available for children’s parties by the way”, as a sarcastic remark of the crude nature of the character.

The show moves to the subject of cannabis and the illegal status of the drug. Hicks expresses a favourable position towards the drug, contradicting the claim that the drug makes people unmotivated, by stating it is a lie and that people can do anything they normally do, but “pot” makes them realise “it’s not worth the fucking effort”. He acknowledges that the drug might lower the sperm count, which he sees as positive since “there’s too many fucking people in the world”, which leads to a bit where he makes misanthropic remarks, particularly against the general notion of childbirth being a miracle, expressing that it is only a chemical reaction, which he then compares to defecation. Hicks makes use of a religious reference by chanting the word hallelujah several times during the bit, which describes a promiscuous woman from a trailer park getting pregnant repeatedly by strangers. He continues with the subject expressing his annoyance about children in airplanes in a joke where a child opens the door of the airplane.

Hicks goes back to the subject of drugs, alleging that making marijuana illegal is like saying that God made a mistake, and to correct his mistake he had to create republicans. The bit includes a dramatisation of God realising he left marijuana on Earth during creation by mistake after smoking during the third day. Hicks then theorises that God left certain drugs growing on earth in order to accelerate evolution. This claim introduces a dramatisation where Hicks portrays a hominid which unable to catch a cow eats the mushrooms growing on the faeces left by the cow, causing him to trip and thus triggering first a laughter attack followed by the realisation “I think we can go to the moon”. By the end of this section of the bit, Hicks goes back to ridicule marketing, by parodying a marketer claiming the presence of a good market in the moon. Hicks goes back to the issue of drugs, telling a personal anecdote involving driving with his friends and being stopped by the police while under the influence of LSD. Hicks then refers to musicians using drugs as something positive, which leads to the next bit dealing with untalented pop musicians who do not use drugs, referred to as “government approved rock and roll”. Hicks performs another dramatisation portraying Satan receiving oral sex by rappers Vanilla Ice and MC Hammer in exchange for fame. He follows the joke by stating that he does not want to sound cold, cruel and vicious, but that he is. To close the bit, Hicks questions why there are no positive drug stories in the news, since he regards his experiences with drugs as positive. He parodies a news broadcast informing about profound realisations made by a young man while using LSD.

The show closes with Hicks taking a serious tone where he compares life with just a ride that can be changed by choosing between fear and love, mentioning as well that the money
invested in weapons would be enough to feed, clothe, and educate the entire world.

5.2.2 Magnus Betnér

There is little biographical information about Magnus Betnér. His official website does not include a biography. In a chat session sponsored by Dagens nyheter’s website, Betnér states that his inspiration to start doing stand-up comedy came while sitting on a sofa in New York in 1998, at the age of 24, listening to a Bill Hicks records called Relentless (Chat with Magnus Betnér, Dagens nyheter website, 2008).

Inget är heligt, was recorded in Gothenburg during the autumn of 2007 and aired in Sweden through cable channel Kanal 5 in December 2007. It was also released as an extended version on DVD in the same year, which is the version used in this study.

Betnér opens the show by joking about Gothenburg, referring to the city as completely devoid of self-irony, following by the next bit criticising Kanal 5’s programming, particularly the shows created by Swedish host duo Filip & Fredrik, discrediting the claim that compares them to legendary Swedish comic duo Hasse & Tage. He also refers to Kanal 5’s schedule as being thought to make viewers physically tired. Betnér continues with a ridiculing of family audiences complaining about his material performed in comedy programme Stockholm Live in Swedish public service television, asking why they would look at a programme intended for adult Kurds, a joke referring to two of the regular performers of the programme, Shan Atci and Özz Nujen, being of Kurdish heritage. He follows up with a joking addressing the promiscuity of rapper Timbuktu, followed by an explanation regarding to why he picks on celebrities in his act, where he clarifies that he does not pick on celebrities but on well known and unknown idiots.

For the next bit, Betnér criticises the tabloids and how much they focus on celebrities and how that affects other media by transforming gossip into news. He points out how celebrities are partly responsible, as they call the tabloids themselves and even pose for pictures, exemplifying it by the presence of staged photos and parodying celebrities who engage in the practice. He further explains that when the pictures are taken by paparazzi, it is a sign that the story was made up by the tabloid.

Moving on to criticising Swedish popular music, Betnér makes fun of Per Gessle’s lyrics, regarding them as juvenile and shallow, mentioning how much the songwriter uses the phrase “sha la la la” in his songs. He also mocks the people who say that he should not criticise Gessle because he has children. He then follows up with an anecdote where he was invited to perform in an award ceremony despite the fact that he dislikes 90% of Swedish music.

The subject of the tabloids is addressed again, referring to Aftonbladet as an irrelevant newspaper that tends to cause confrontations, using himself as an example when the tabloid called him after the aforementioned award ceremony where he made fun of rappers, claiming that they were very upset, which led to death threats. He uses the bit to ridicule the rappers.

Betnér continues with the act by talking about tabloid Expressen, regarding their debate articles as the sharpest while at the same time rolling his eyes and mentioning some of the subjects of those debates, such as if it is good or bad that tennis players read books, implying the shallow nature of the articles. Betnér then ridicules some of the articles about sex offenders and how those articles often go over the line.

The issue of feminism is addressed by Betnér stating that he is a feminist. He makes fun of people who claim that he calls himself a feminist just to get girls, stating that he is tired of girls and that his purpose as a feminist is to encourage equality and that “no means no” become a clear concept, exemplified by a joke where his daughter has drunk sex with a thousand men in a cruise but says no to the
1001st man. He also criticises that it is bad that his daughter was told at preschool that she should not touch her private parts, while his view is that she should do it as much as she wants as it is the most fun she is going to have. Betnér also criticises double standards and how masculine words such as “kuk” (cock) are not as negative as “fitta” (cunt). He also criticises how children are treated differently, as girls are treated in an overprotective manner compared to a tougher approach towards the boys. This is represented in a dramatisation of a parent reacting differently when a boy and a girl falls down. He also criticises parents claiming that their daughters have always liked the colour pink, which he ridicules by saying in an ironic tone that many children from the Stone Age ran around wearing pink fur.

Betnér goes back to criticising the tabloids, focusing on their fashion columns and their authors. He questions why Ebba von Sydow should write about fashion and if it is a matter of self-expression why not letting Thomas Di Leva write the column. He jokes about Di Leva’s column recommending every time to have a beard and a gown. Betnér goes on mentioning a “pretend morality” on behalf of the tabloids and Swedish commercial television channel TV4, mentioning the anti-mobbing campaign promoted by Aftonbladet, which he sees as promoting mobbing through their fashion columns, and TV4 sending Swedish celebrities to Colombia “so that that Colombia understands that they are poor” and the event being covered by Aftonbladet. Betnér criticises also Aftonbladet’s for their coverage about Muslims, usually depicting a screaming man with a large beard holding the Koran, promoting racism according to Betnér.

Moving on to the subject of religious fundamentalism, Betnér regards it as dangerous, following his statement with a dramatisation where Jesus comes back to earth and meeting preacher Runar Sögaard. In the dramatisation, Betnér portrays Jesus questioning the preacher and claiming that masturbation is not wrong and that he engaged in the activity in order to survive forty days in the desert. The portrayed Jesus also states that the views of Sögaard and pastor Åke Green regarding homosexuality as a disease are wrong and that he hanged out with twelve guys wearing dresses for three years. This dramatisation can be considered blasphemous not only because of the subjects but also because of Jesus using profane language. The profane language is also used throughout the whole presentation. After this, Betnér mentions ironically that he grew up as a Christian and later in life he became an atheist. While addressing the audience he tells them that he knows that they do not care at all about the Bible, and that in Sweden it has become a taboo to ask someone about their religious affiliation, stating also that in Sweden it is okay to believe “in something” but not in God. Betnér addresses the topic of Christian values in schools promoted by the Christian Democrat Party, which he illustrates with biblical examples like Joseph being thrown to a well by his brothers, or Lot’s daughters having intercourse with their own father.

His criticism of religion continues, making fun of Paul and Peter in the New Testament, comparing Paul to Aftonbladet. Betnér also makes fun of Islam, particularly the seventy two virgins, questioning if they could be traded by a nice car and a flat screen TV. The authorship of both the Bible and the Koran is also ridiculed, making a dramatisation of how the apocryphal books were written, including homosexual references of Jesus and Judas. He pinpoint that he is obviously joking, and that people should not get upset about this kind of jokes, including making cartoons of the prophet Mohammed.

The act moves on to a bit addressing the issue of tolerance and racism, making clear his position about not having to be careful about offending anyone. He goes on to share a personal anecdote about being threatened by Swedish Nazis, making fun of them using a real letter, considering them to be sweet. He jokes about integration ministry Nyamko Sabuni, stating that it is good that she is both black and female, but that it is a pity that her party, Folkpartiet, is a Nazi party. He criticises...
how Muslim schools have been regarded as promoters of terrorism, mentioning that there were 498 terrorist attacks during 2006 in the European Union, and only one of those was perpetrated by Muslims, while the rest were perpetrated by separatists and people with different political affiliations.

Betnér changes the subject to relationships, stating his annoyance about having dinner with other couples, including a dramatisation where he gets rid of the other couple, shocking them by showing them different sex toys. He moves on to the issue of divorce, especially about the stigma of failure attached to it with a dramatisation where he mentions to his wife all the things that annoy him in the relationship. Regarding the issues addressed in the dramatisation, he goes back to his criticism of Aftonbladet, wondering about which issue will encourage them to give him a call.

Throughout the presentation, he parodies the way people from the tabloid introduces themselves through the telephone, repeating the phrase “Jag ringer från Aftonbladet. Du kanske anar varför jag ringer” (I’m calling from Aftonbladet. You maybe have an idea why I’m calling). He compares them to telemarketers using a script. Betnér also goes back to the issue of Aftonbladet fabricating news and creating conflicts, in an anecdote about them calling him about people being upset about his performance in a programme a day before the programme was aired for the first time.

The next bit talks about children. Betnér claims he hates parents that consider children as something fashionable. He also states that he hates all children except his own. Betnér mentions possible problems with his daughter becoming rebellious at school as she learns to speak more telling the teachers for example that “there is not Santa Claus, daddy told me so”. He goes back again to the issue of divorce, again using a dramatisation where he sings gladly in the shower about more annoyances of the relationship and fantasising about his wife dying.

Following the issue of divorce, Betnér goes on to criticise animal activists for defending only “cute animals”. Once again he goes back to the criticism of tabloids, this time about the bad role models they promote such as ‘bimbos’ and the influence they have among other women, parodying a woman in her late thirties behaving like a ‘bimbo’.

Betnér moves back to talking about children, sharing anecdotes about his daughter being overtly curious about the body causing him to get uncomfortable around other parents. He also makes fun of her daughter’s drawings, stating that her ducks and houses look much alike. The final anecdote is about playing with his daughter in the bath and her daughter asking him if she can sit in his penis, causing him to get shocked, stating that he has limits about being natural about the naked body. Following by a pause, he finishes the joke by mentioning that now the tabloids have a reason to call him.

For the first encore, he addresses the subject of pornography and masturbation. He claims to be criticised by feminists because he likes pornography, even though he clarifies that he despises the industry and that pornography should be cleaned to what he refers to “regular happy people who fucks”. He follows the bit by apologising about his participation in a TV programme of improvised comedy called Tack gode Gud.

For the second and final encore, Betnér criticises Aftonbladet once again, calling the tabloid Satan. The reason of his criticism in this final bit is the conspiracies surrounding the assassination of Olof Palme, regarding such theories as far fetched parodying the style used by the tabloid to write about the theory, focusing on irrelevant and speculative details about the murderer.
6 Analysis and discussion

6.1 Presentations

Summarasing the core subjects of both presentations, Betnér bases his act upon eight subjects:

1. Critique of the media, particularly tabloids and giving special attention to Aftonbladet.
2. Feminism, including double standards and a corresponding criticism of both.
3. Religion, focusing on religious fundamentalism in general and tolerance.
5. Relationships, paying special attention to divorce.
6. Politics, mainly focused towards racism and xenophobia.
7. Celebrities, usually focusing on their close relation to Aftonbladet.
8. Social activities, usually associated to relationships and political correctness.

Most of the other subjects addressed in Inget är heligt are closely related to the aforementioned core subjects, which in occasions are also combined, as he does when speaking about religion including a parody on the Christian values in schools promoted by the Christian Democrats (Kristdemokraterna); the issue of pornography is treated from a feminist point of view; and the topic of celebrities is usually in direct relation to the criticism of the media.

Bill Hicks' Revelations on the other hand is based upon nine core subjects:

1. Hatred towards the average Americans.
2. Earlier addiction to cigarettes (addressed briefly).
3. Politics, particularly criticism of the Republican lead government.
4. Advertising and marketing, treated with a negative perspective.
5. Entertainment, including music, film and television.
6. Drugs, related at times to government policies.
7. Misanthropy, including hatred for children.
8. Religion, usually related to politics.
9. Idealism, usually as a complement of other topics exposing his points of view.

As in the case of Betnér’s presentation, Hicks also mixes the core subjects, for example his hatred towards average Americans with politics, entertainment and religion with politics, idealism with entertainment, idealism with drugs, entertainment and hatred towards average Americans, and religion with misanthropy.

Religion is a subject that both comedians prioritise in their acts, including sub-topics in common such as fundamentalism and its relation with politics, the origin of the Bible, and jokes on the second coming of Jesus.

Celebrities are addressed by both comedians, having in common their criticism for popular musicians, although emphasising different aspects. While Betnér regards Per Gessle and certain Swedish rappers as mediocre, Hicks’ criticism links popular musicians to conservative Republican politics, although he also emphasises the factor of their mediocrity and lack of talent. Both comedians also criticise television; Hicks referring to programme American Gladiators as being a distraction impeding people to think by themselves, and Betnér criticising Kanal 5 and its programming.

The comedians’ idealism is another subject in common, although from very different perspectives. Betnér’s idealism can be linked to his feminist position, when he criticises the different treatment that boys and girls receive early in life by both their parents and preschools or the criticism of abusive conducts from males against females that lead to sexual abuse. Hicks’ idealism on the other hand is linked to his criticism of American politics, stating by the end of his presentation that the money invested on weapons could be used to feed every human being.

Both comedians express self-criticism, such as when Betnér acknowledges being uncomfortable around other parents when his daughter expresses her curiosity about the human body in public, or when he admits his double standards towards pornography. Hicks’ also expresses self-criticism when he tells the audience that he does not want to sound cold, cruel or vicious but that he
actually is. He also recognises his bad experiences with drugs, despite having a favourable opinion about them.

Adressing the subject of politics, Hicks and Betnér engage in what Mintz call violation of socially acceptable language taboos, as Bill referring to the U.S. government as totalitarian and Betnér referring to the Liberal People’s Party (Folkpartiet) as a Nazi party, both terms being considered as taboo as both governments are democratic. Similar language violations are expressed in the sexually explicit remarks, the profanity and the blasphemous remarks used by both comedians throughout their acts. A noticeable difference regarding the use of blasphemy is that Bill Hicks does not limit its use only while addressing religion, like Betnér does. Instead he makes blasphemous remarks while addressing misanthropy (singing Hallelujah while mocking child birth).

Both acts have a very critical approach towards the addressed issues, although there is a noticeable difference in the way they communicate their criticism. Betnér makes use of diatribes (meaning ironic and satirical criticism) whereas Hicks, who also makes use of diatribes, regularly rants (meaning speaking in an angry manner) to the audience. This difference could be attached to national stereotypes of Swedes being usually quieter when speaking in public or verbally expressing anger when compared to Americans. A similar situation where this difference arises is during the short dramatisations employed by both comedians, as some of Hicks’ are noticeably louder, more elaborate and more explicit than those of Betnér. Despite this difference, both comedians are passionately abusive about their verbal abuse addressing their main topics, being politics for Hicks and the media for Betnér. Coincidentally both comedians make a comparison to Satan at some point of the show, such as Hicks calling George Bush “child of Satan” while introducing the subject of politics, and Betnér calling tabloid Aftonbladet Satan during his last encore.

Regarding the way in which both comedians structure their act, both mix the subjects and also leave the subjects returning to them later, such as Hicks with politics and drugs and Betnér with tabloids and feminism. Interestingly, Hicks’ most addressed and focused subject throughout Revelations is politics, while media and entertainment do not take as much time and are discussed in combination with politics; whereas in Inget är heligt Betnér inversely focuses most of the act on his criticism towards media, dedicating only a small fraction of the act to discuss politics. This could be explained by the comedians’ own cultural contexts, as politics in Sweden are not nearly as polarised as in the United States, where religion plays an important role in politics. Another factor could be that Swedes usually do not discuss national politics in public as much as Americans do.

6.2 Interviews

The issue of foreign influences is addressed in both interviews. Regarding the American influence, Jiménez, Hernández and Murillo acknowledge that it has been important for the development of their respective comedy careers. Nonetheless, they also mention an important influence coming not from the U.S. but from other regions, such as Britain and particularly Mexico and Argentina, both major producers and exporters of media texts in the Hispanic world. It is worthy of notice that Murillo and Hernández mention what they call a decay in Latin American humour when it comes to originality, as the adaptation of American humour has become a recurrent practice.

Hernández mentions that influences become unconscious. He and Murillo also stated that they have had access to cable television since an early age, which implies an extensive access of American programmes, as cable operators initially provided American channels such as NBC, CBS and ABC almost exclusively during the 80’s. Later on, Latin American channels started to become available, such as
international channels from Latin American Networks such as Mexican Televisa or Argentinian Telefe, but also Latin American franchises of American channels such as MTV, HBO, Cinemax and Fox that provide subtitled American programmes along with a limited selection of programmes and films in Spanish, mostly from Mexico and Argentina. Besides cable and subscription television, American programmes and films have been widely available in Costa Rica through network television in Spanish dubbed versions, usually dubbed in Mexico, but also through UHF channels such as channel 19, which during the 80's and 90's were transmitting American channels such as ABC (which was done without a permit from the American network) and MTV, and later on transmitting original programming in English, mainly talk shows hosted by American expatriates. This setting supports Jiménez's statement that the Costa Rican audience has already been widely exposed to American culture.

The role of new media, such as Youtube, is addressed in both interviews. Jiménez does mention that the impact of new media may not be that big, but earlier in the interview he mentions that the internet and Youtube have been an important source in the development of his stand-up comedy material. Murillo also mentions the importance of such video websites as both a tool for reference material and as a medium for distribution of their own material to a wider audience, exemplified by the success of a sketch uploaded in Youtube for which they received feedback not only from Costa Rica, but mostly from other Spanish speaking countries as well. The international success of this particular sketch reflects that the statement by Murillo that the core of the humour is what really matters despite its regional origin is valid, although Jiménez points out the limitation of language when he mentions that stand-up comedy in English is particularly difficult to translate or subtitle. As mentioned earlier in the theory chapter, Hafez addresses the issue when he states that dubbing and subtitling may alter meanings, but despite that, the core message still reaches consumers in the importing countries. It is also worthy of notice that English has been widely taught within the Costa Rican education system, increasing the amount of bilingual individuals and those who have at least a basic understanding of the language. English has also become a key requirement for important economic sectors in the country, such as the tourism industry and the outsourcing of technical support and customer service positions by multinational companies such as Microsoft and Hewlett Packard catering to American customers.

Hernández mentions how Mexican programmes have been widely consumed and accepted in Costa Rica despite the presence of specific regional Mexican terms and idioms that are unfamiliar to Costa Rican Spanish. Jiménez also adds to this discussion when he mentions how very local humour from other Spanish speaking countries is funny to him, even when comedians might make use of unfamiliar terms. A possible explanation to this is, besides the understanding of those terms in relation to the context, as stated by Murillo, is that Mexico has been a key source of programming for Costa Rican and Latin American media, more than any other Spanish speaking country. Not only is original Mexican programming widely available throughout Latin America, but also the majority of dubbed versions of programmes and films come also from Mexico, thus acting as a filter for American and other foreign media in the region.

Regarding the adaptability of foreign cultural imports, the issue of censorship is addressed by Jiménez, Hernández and Murillo. Jiménez mentions a lack of open mindedness in Costa Rican audiences when compared to developed countries, exemplified by his a bit about marriage that was not so well received by the audience. Murillo and Hernández mention their self-censorship, avoiding sensitive topics such as religion and racism, although they also mention a rather racier sketch dealing with a corrupt pastor that only got one complaint that was disregarded by the group. This could be evidence of a cultural change, especially since the programme has a family audience and it is
aired in a major network. Even when access to cable television and internet in Costa Rica is rather minimal, these media could be at least partly responsible for the mentality change. Hernández points out that American programmes dealing with much more controversial subject matter, such as the cartoon *South Park*, are consumed and accepted by the audience, although he and Murillo point out that similar programmes produced in Latin America do not get as much acceptance. This could be explained by the traditional conservatism of Latin American societies, including Costa Rica, where Catholicism still is constitutionally the official religion of the state. Another factor that might contribute to this is the absence of an established entertainment industry in the country, referred to by Jiménez as an underdevelopment. Programmes of a racier nature are rather new to the Latin American public, but very well established in the U.S., which can contribute to certain scepticism on behalf of the audience. The economic power of the U.S. industry has been unparalleled with its Latin American counterparts, which has been reflected more evidently in the visual quality of their products. This aspect can be challenged with the development of cheaper and more accessible digital technology that contributes to the improvement of the visual quality of the programmes. Murillo and Hernández joked after the interview that one of the oddest compliments they have got is that their programme was so good that it did not look like a Costa Rican production.

The concept of cultural discrimination on behalf of the audience proposed by Strinati, and mentioned earlier is evident in the choices of the interviewee when it comes to actively use different media as reference and source of influence, in the case of Jiménez when he mentions that American comedians have been a major influence in terms of performance, borrowing and appropriating certain physical qualities from the performers. In this same manner, Murillo and Hernández mention how they use the internet in order to access material that otherwise is not available in the country, using it also as reference.

### 6.3 Discussion

The example of Betnér’s presentation compared to Hicks’ shows a degree of success in terms of adapting the not only the genre of stand-up comedy but also the elements of the style of comedy of a specific American comedian in a Swedish context. It is safe to say that stand-up comedy is a well established form of entertainment in Sweden, as there are several performers and even venues such as comedy clubs dedicated to this specific art form. The influence of Hicks in Betnér’s style became much more evident through the analysis, as it is showed that both comedians have similar approaches to certain subjects such as the criticism towards religion and fundamentalism. Both show a degree of anger and discomfort, each in a particular way, Betnér expressing it in a much mellow manner by his constant use of diatribes whereas Hicks expresses himself in a much louder fashion by ranting and even screaming. These approaches can even be compared with stereotypes of Swedes and Americans, where the Swedes are said to be reluctant to engage in harsh confrontations and tend to be calmer in this sense when compared to the more openly confrontational American.

The nature of the core issues on which both presentations are structured reflect also matters related to their regional contexts, clearly evidenced in the way both comedians approach the issue of politics, discussed extensively by Hicks and briefly by Betnér, as the issue does not have the same level of controversy in Sweden as in the U.S. Betnér chose to focus on the media, particularly the criticism of tabloids and also relating most of the other addressed topics to the criticism of media. Hicks builds his act in a similar manner, but relating most of the subjects to the core issue of politics. Both comedians do engage in controversy, particularly touching taboo subjects that can be regarded as uncomfortable in a regular conversation.
As for the issue of Americanisation and the role of global media, the relativist approach of Hafez shows validity, particularly in a Latin American setting. The extensive presence of American programmes should not be disregarded, but in Latin America, the presence of Mexican programmes has also been extensive, as the Mexican entertainment industry also has a strong economic power. Mexico has also an important role in the distribution of American programmes, since the preference for dubbed programmes is widespread in network television in Spanish speaking countries, and the dubbing is provided mostly by Mexico, acting as a filter and interpreter of American culture for the whole region, including countries with rather strong entertainment industries such as Argentina and Colombia. The only exception would be Spain, where dubbing is also preferred as in other Spanish speaking countries, but instead of importing the Mexican dubbed programmes their dubbing is done in Spain.

Despite the notion of hegemony of American media, it is worthy of notice that their industry is also permeable, open to other influences. Many programmes that became successful in the U.S. originated elsewhere, for example the reality show *Survivor*, based on a concept developed originally in Sweden as *Expedition Robinson*; the game show *Moment of Truth*, which is also available in Sweden as *Sanningens ögonblick* and other countries as well, originated in Colombia as *Nada más que la verdad*; the drama series *Ugly Betty* is also a successful adaptation of a Colombian soap opera called *Betty La Fea* that has also been adapted in other countries worldwide. Other popular programmes, such as *American Idol* and *Big Brother* were originally developed in the U.K. and the Netherlands respectively. It should be noticed though that the American versions of those shows are widely available in several countries, whereas other regional versions may not be as widespread.

It is also important to underline that despite the widespread availability of American cultural exports does not necessarily mean that the audiences prefer them to the domestic productions; another fact that challenges the notion of domination or hegemony. It also challenges a personal assumption regarding the interviewees, as I was expecting them to be inclined towards American productions as a main source of influence. Their answers reflected a much more eclectic set of influences that included American productions among other influences from Mexico, Argentina, the U.K., Canada and Colombia, but also including personal experiences as well as a source of inspiration, as underlined by Jiménez. The personal context and experiences are perhaps the most important reference in terms of content regarding stand-up comedy, which adds to the adaptability and success of the genre in different regions, making borrowed and appropriated characteristics related to the performance style secondary but important nonetheless.
7 References

7.1 Books


7.2 Articles


Palmquist, Mike. “Content analysis”. In School of Information, University of Texas website. Retrieved April 19, 2008 http://www.glis.utexas.edu/~palmquis/courses/content.html


7.4 Audiovisual


7.5 Interviews


*** Interviews and transcripts are available by request at sjbohm@gmail.com.
8 Annex – Gestaltning and integration

8.1 Gestaltning process

The original idea for this part of the project was to write material for a stand-up comedy show, although this idea got quickly shelved as it proved to be too big of a challenge to be combined with the written part of the project. While researching initially about the subject, watching presentations and interviews with stand-up comedians I then realised that writing such kind of material could take much longer than one semester, since the risk of running out of ideas too fast was big and for a lack of experience writing such material.

Instead, I decided to change the idea to producing a radio programme. The first idea was doing a radio documentary, but it got discarded quickly, as it is not a personally appealing radio genre. The next idea was to produce a pilot for a radio reportage series about popular culture, dedicating the pilot to humour. Following the advice of tutor Thomas Lunderquist, I changed the concept to a series on stand-up comedy, still with the intention to produce a pilot. The idea stayed, but a period of confusion came when deciding the general tone of the programme along with its structure. I also had not discarded the idea of having humour in general as a theme. As I planned to travel to Costa Rica on the 26th of February, I decided to feature an interview with a Costa Rican stand-up comedian, which presented yet another challenge, as there are not many artists performing that particular genre there. A friend and former classmate from the university in Costa Rica told me about Hernán Jiménez, who was working on his stand-up comedy debut.

Checking a review from newspaper *La Nación* about the first presentation, and later checking a couple of short videos posted on YouTube, I decided to contact him. While reading all the information on his website, I realised that he could be interesting to interview, as he was also formally trained as an actor in the U.S. and Canada, and was working with different projects such as a one-man show, a documentary and also working as a television director.

After a few days I got a response from him, and he wrote that he was interested in helping me with the project. I also decided to contact a group of comedians, *La Media Docena*, working in both theatre and television in Costa Rica. I was not expecting to get any response from them, as I assumed their schedules were far too busy. They responded the very next day, writing they were interested in the project and that they were willing to help me once I got to Costa Rica.

A few days before the trip, I still was struggling with the questions for the interviews, as I still did not have a clear concept for the programme. Two days before the trip I had prepared the questions for Hernán Jiménez, but still had no idea about what to ask the guys from *La Media Docena*. The idea of interviewing four people at the same time was far too stressing. Still, the day of the trip came, and still no questions for that interview. After almost two weeks in Costa Rica, I finally came up with the questions, right after confirming with their secretary that only two of the guys were available that specific day, which happened to be the same day I agreed with Hernán to do his interview. Luckily enough, the guys from the group could meet later in the day.

After considering the idea of booking a cheap recording studio for the occasion, I finally discarded it and bought a portable recorder a week before the interviews instead, which turned out to be a far more practical solution as it was easy to use, and the audio quality was good. On March 12th I recorded both interviews, and the results were better than expected, as all the guys were really helpful and open. As a last minute decision, I chose not to use the group interview as part of the programme, but as a part of the written part, as I decided, that very day, to go back to the programme about stand-up and not humour in general. That way I could interview the group
in Spanish and thus make the most out of the meeting, which in the end worked really well, as they were very knowledgeable not only about humour but also about media.

Back to Sweden on March 19th, I was still having problems with the structure of the programme and the script, although the concept was now clearer. The script took form slowly, and I decided to use the whole 20 minutes of the interview with Hernán, making it the main focus of the programme, which finally ended up addressing a similar subject as the written thesis, although in a much more relaxed and descriptive manner. I added some clips from different stand-up comedians as illustrations, which turned out taking quite a long time, as there was an excessive amount of material to choose the clips from. The difficult part was finding good jokes no longer than 25 seconds, as it usually takes much longer to deliver a punch line. It was also a distracting task, as I ended up listening to more hours of material than I planned to do that day.

The main problem with the script was that it required a lot of small changes. Writing for radio requires simplicity, which can be quite complicated to achieve. Some words can become problematic when reading aloud, as they can be tricky to pronounce. The same happened with the sentences, as they have to be rather short in order not to run out of air while reading. Thus, rehearsing the script, even a short one, can become really annoying.

The recording was done with the portable recorder at home, along with the editing, using Wavelab, as the multi-track software was giving me problems. The recording had to be done after 1am on a Tuesday, so that the microphones would not pick any of the noises from the building, as they are quite sensible. Once all the recording and the editing was done, I quickly wrote, recorded and added the short bluesy musical theme for the closing and the opening of the programme and send it to some friends in order to get feedback and to correct any possible major mistake before the first presentation.

8.2 Integration

The radio programme is intended to work as a comment for the subject matter addressed in the research paper, although without going too much into detail. Instead, it addresses the subject of the spread of stand-up comedy as a genre throughout the world, while also explaining briefly what stand-up comedy is by using excerpts from well known comedians from the U.S., Sweden and Latin America as illustrations of different aspects and possibilities that characterise the genre and also as an example of the adaptation of the genre outside the U.S.

The core of the programme is the interview with Hernán Jiménez that was also used as a reference in the research paper. As the focus of the programme is stand-up comedy, the subject of the role of the new media is mentioned during the interview, but not extensively addressed as in the paper.

The introductory part of the programme works also as a complement to “Background” chapter of the paper, since the use of audio examples make the definition clearer, more concise and also amusing for the listener. The general approach of the programme is much more relaxed, with the intention of being informative but also a bit entertaining, as a very serious tone could easily alienate listeners, especially when the discussed issue is a specific genre of comedy.